

ARTICLE APPEARED
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WASHINGTON STAR
2 JULY 1978

MARY McGRORY: Tips from cooler heads for a safe and sane Fourth

British Prime Minister James Callaghan offers a felicitous Fourth of July example of how a country can kick the imperial habit.

The lion is absolutely clean now.

"Sunny Jim" told his dear friend Jimmy Carter, in a speech he gave for the Hubert Humphrey Institute dinner in New York, that for large nations, smart is better than tough — which is, of course, precisely the message that the colonists sent the Crown 202 years ago.

In Africa, the representative of the former Empire counselled, the inhabitants should have something to say about their destiny.

"African countries," he declared, "do not want to be pawns on the chessboard of international rivalry."

The president is just coming out of a prolonged bout of trying to apply the principles of geopolitics to tribal warfare. He was egged on by Zbigniew Brzezinski, his national security

adviser, an intellectual who, like his predecessors in that post, believes deeply in a show of brawn in foreign policy.

No one has ever been able to figure out why professors, who are, theoretically at least, dedicated to the exercise of brain-power, are the first to reach for the bombers, the destroyers and the troops when crossed in their great designs.

Brzezinski led his patron into an unseemly public row with Fidel Castro over Cuban involvement in the invasion of Zaire. He came back from a heady tour of China loaded for bear. He announced that we had "firm proof" of Cuban meddling at Soviet instigation.

The State Department presided over the leaking of the piquant information that the Marxist mercenaries from Havana were indeed guarding the capitalist installation of the Gulf Oil Co. in Angola — an echo of U.N.

Ambassador Andrew Young's heretical statement of 16 months ago that the Cubans were "a stabilizing force" in Africa.

Audience reaction to "documentary evidence" of Castro's complicity was negative, in Congress and points east. Callaghan spotted a lot of U.S. Christopher Columbuses "discovering Africa," and Julius Nyerere, the luminous leader of Tanzania, charged that Carter was listening to "hysterical voices."

Brzezinski's view about the Soviets in Africa, as elsewhere, is simplicity itself: "Don't let them get away with it."

That is because he is a professor, not a politician. The diametrically opposite view is advanced by Andrew Young, a thorough-going politician.

Young, being black, having fought in the civil rights battles, having lived the life of a colonial in the South, knows people are going to get

away with things — injustice, oppression and evil. But he also knows that patience, persistence and a constant stating of the realities and equities may finally bring change.

Young has a special relationship with Carter. He is a fellow Georgian. He went bail for him in the campaign with liberals and blacks. He does not hesitate to speak up. When White House whining was heard about the president's "tied hands" in the Katanga crisis, Young observed on national television that the president could do anything he wanted to do — with the support of the American people.

When Carter started talking tough, Young publicly pointed out that there wasn't much point in it, unless the president intended to act. The State Department was silently cheering him on. Under the Brzezinski threat, the traditional rivalry between the U.N. ambassador and the secretary

of state broke down completely. Vance and Young were a team operating to pull our African policy out of the mud.

Two weeks ago, Carter gave way. A diplomat, Don McHenry, was dispatched to Angola to initiate something in the way of rational discourse.

McHenry is a member of Andrew Young's staff.

It seemed to everyone with the possible exception of Brzezinski that it was a much better idea than sending arms through a third country, as proposed by CIA Director Stansfield Turner in May.

The crisis has cooled, although Callaghan obviously thinks there is danger of recurring fever. He urged the United States not to respond to Soviet and Cuban moves in Africa with direct military involvement.

In Texas, last weekend, the president backslid. For a macho crowd in Fort Worth he declared, "We are not going to let the Soviet Union push us around."

But at his press conference, he was quite civil about Leonid Brezhnev, a man with pacific intentions. He was defensive about Brzezinski, who is plainly the loser in the civil war in the administration. He is not going to be pushed around by "special interest" groups, who he thinks have been Brzezinski's worst enemies. The Jews, who fought bitterly against the Mideast plane deal, thought he meant them. The Greeks, who are opposed to the lifting of the Turkish arms embargo, thought he had them in mind.

The need to be tough, the Brzezinski formula, is apparently going to be imported.

But thanks to Callaghan, Vance, Young and Nyerere, we're having a safe and sane Fourth. Let's hope it lasts.